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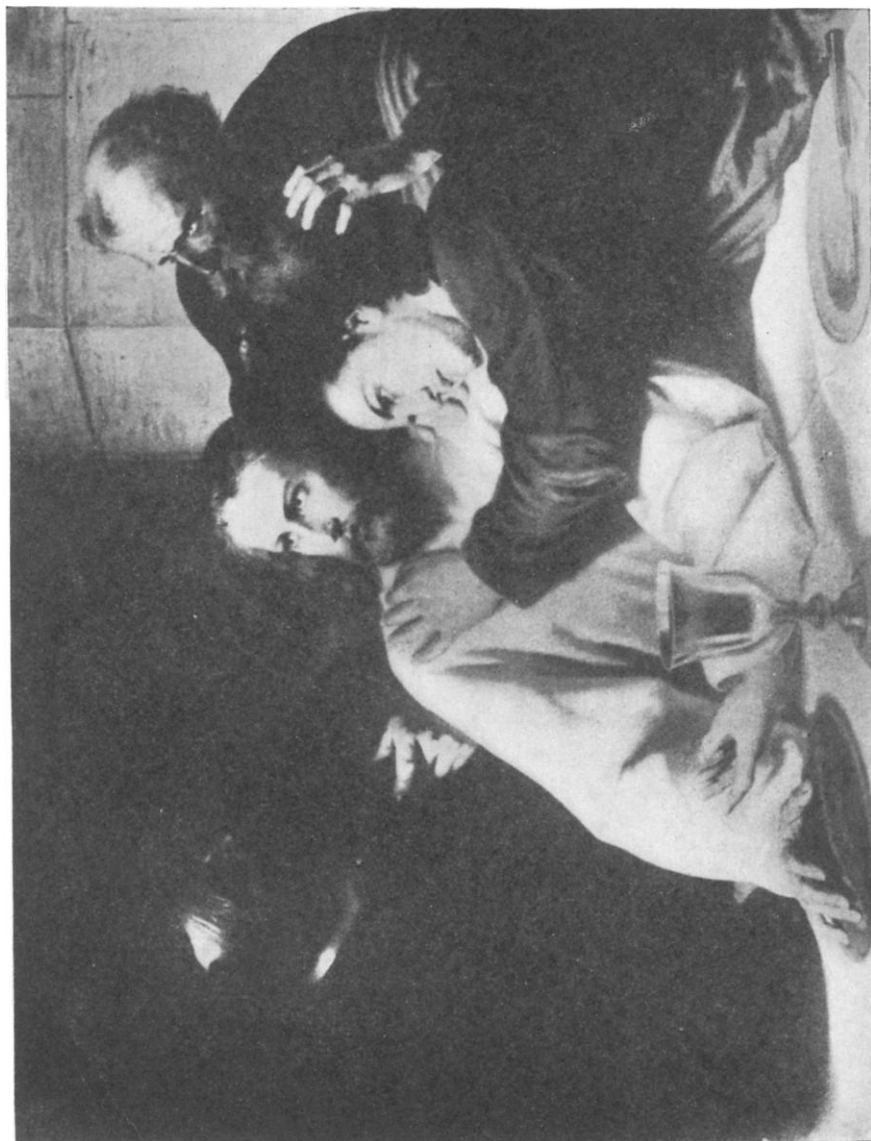
THE RELIGIOUS VALUE OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

PROFESSOR IRVING F. WOOD, PH.D.
Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

The history of the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus in the early church falls into three periods: (1) the primitive church; (2) the Pauline thought; (3) the second-century church.

1. *The primitive church* was entirely Jewish in its presuppositions. In order to represent its religious life we must dismiss Christianity, as it is now understood, from our mind, and imagine ourselves in the midst of Judaism, recalling also certain diverse elements within it; for Judaism was not a unity. At one extreme was a worldly-wise, conservative Sadduceeism; at the other, a hot-headed, impatient, revolutionary zealotism. The church represented neither of these. There were zealots within the church, but the church was not zealotism. Between the two extremes stood a legalistic, scribal Phariseeism, with its new doctrines, such as the resurrection. Like most advanced movements, it was sensitively intolerant of a movement still more advanced. The church took over the messianic theology of Phariseeism, including the new doctrine of the resurrection, but the church was not Phariseeism. There was another tendency of thought, which never differentiated itself from Phariseeism sufficiently to secure a name. It was the tendency to place the emphasis of religious life upon the national messianic hope, rather than upon the personal keeping of the law. Its particular expression is found in the Apocalypses. The Apocalypses, however, are the record of that movement and not its cause. It was with this messianic Judaism that the Christian church was most closely allied; out of it in a sense it sprang. It was a messianic Judaistic sect, having as its peculiar feature that it held Jesus to be the Messiah. About this thought of the Messiah the religious life of the church centered.

The messianic hope was the great inspiration of Judaism. In the world at large the Jew was despised. His favorite religious



Schmitz

"LORD, IS IT I?"

term for himself was "the poor." He stood by the highway of the world and watched the proud gentile ride by. He lived in gentile cities, handled gentile money, and over his own sacred city stood a gentile standard. Then he shut his eyes and dreamed. God would not always let it be so. His nation could never win freedom, much less supremacy, by its own power. He was not deluded by revolutionary hopes, as was the zealot. He must wait God's action; and God's action would never come till Israel was holy. What could he do? He could not fight, but he might live a holy life, he could pray for his nation, and wait. There are few situations in the world which tend more to develop an intense and abiding emotion than the effort to hold hope in the midst of conditions that seem permanently hopeless. The best way for the modern man to come into touch with that type of emotional experience is to place himself in touch with the despair and the hope, the heat and the passion, of modern socialism. Add to this economic situation the sacred intensity of religious emotion, and one can appreciate in some degree the feeling of messianic Judaism.

Then there came into this field of emotional religious nationalism the claim that the Messiah had already come. A few enthusiasts were following him, but as yet he was only doing preliminary work. Is it any wonder that the mass of Jewish messianism withheld its support until further proof? He had not yet done a single messianic deed. It seemed to them the part of wisdom to wait before accepting him; and was not this wisdom justified by the fact that, instead of becoming the Messiah, he was executed? Besides, with all their longing for the messianic triumph, two things were plain: first, that the time of the gentiles was not yet full; and second, that Israel was not yet prepared for the Messiah.

But now a new element entered into the situation. The followers of Jesus actually said that though he had been killed he was not dead after all. They said that he had come out of the grave; that some of them had seen him alive. To be sure, he did not go on teaching. That was because God had taken him back to heaven. "Now," his followers argued, "why did God raise him from the dead unless he is the Messiah?" And, so far as the

records go, we do not know that their opponents ever tried to answer the question, except by denying that Jesus did rise from the dead. If one granted that he was raised from the dead, then previous objections would be answered. It is true that the times of the gentiles are not yet fulfilled. It is true that Israel is not yet ready for the Messiah. That is proved by the fact that Israel killed Jesus. When Israel is ready, then God will send him again. Let Israel hasten to prepare herself to receive her king.

Messianic Judaism, if it could only grant the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, might then accept him as the Messiah. The followers of Jesus believed that his resurrection proved his messiahship. This then was the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus in the primitive church. It was simply, so far as we can see, a proof of the messiahship of Jesus.

2. *The Pauline thought.*—In the Pauline thought a new emphasis entered. Paul had been a legalistic Pharisee. He also had believed in messianism; but we may suppose from his later writings that the emphasis of his religious life had been less upon the national hope than upon the personal relation of man to God. About this problem of personal relation his richest and most original writing centered.

Yet Paul entered Christianity by the door of messianism. Jesus, whom he had doubtless regarded as indubitably dead, had appeared to him. That meant that he was alive. We of the twentieth century explain visions. Men of the first century accepted them. Paul never for a moment doubted that the living Jesus had appeared to him. It may be well to remind ourselves that, in the history of religion, visions play a very important part. Not to speak of Hebrew prophets, both Buddhism and Mohammedanism began in the visions of their founders. These religions, when new, rested for their verity, as did Paul's, upon the belief of these founders in the reality of their visions. Paul's immediate conclusion was that, if Jesus were living, he must be the Messiah.

He availed himself of his new belief in the deep problem which he seems to have been so long pondering: How may man come into harmony with God? The answer of Pharisaic ritualism had not

satisfied him, but his belief in Jesus brought him to a new sense of harmony with God.

It is not easy to follow the working of Paul's mind at this point. We know the results; we can only surmise the processes. The results may be summarized as follows: (1) The true way to harmony with God, in the Hebrew religion itself, was simply to accept his message—the way of faith. (2) If Jesus is the Messiah—and his resurrection proves it—then the way to God lies in the acceptance of Jesus' messiahship. (3) There cannot be two ways to God. If it is through the acceptance of Jesus' messiahship, it cannot also be through keeping laws. (4) For the future, the messiahship means a messianic kingdom on earth. The resurrection of Christ is the pledge of that kingdom. (5) It is also the pledge of the resurrection of dead believers to share in the Messiah's kingdom. (6) It also shed light—and this is the characteristically Pauline development—on the problem of the personal relation of man to God. Man obtains harmony with God by believing God's message. What is the result? In what does harmony with God consist? Paul found the answer in that experience which we call the mystic union with God. He has various terms for it. He calls it the new man; the life of the Spirit; being in Christ; and says in its exposition, "I live, yet no longer I but Christ."

In these days we speak of God as immanent in the natural world. Paul means that God is immanent in the heart of man. Such an idea must always be expressed by figures. One of the figures he uses is the resurrection of Christ. This life in harmony with God is a new life. It is illustrated by Christ; he died, was buried, rose again to a new life. Baptism—immersion and rising again from the water—is a symbol of the Christian's new life. So "as Christ was raised from the dead, we also" must "walk in newness of life"; and our new life is in reality one with the life of the risen and glorified Messiah.

We have then three Pauline uses of the resurrection of Jesus: (1) to prove that Jesus is the Messiah, as with all primitive Christians; (2) to prove that believers will be raised from the dead in the future, for if death could not hold him, it cannot hold those

spiritually united with him; (3) both to prove and to illustrate the life of the Christian. It is a new life, dead to the old life, lived in a new and more intimate relation to God. This last use of the idea, while most fruitful for religious experience, has had little effect upon formal Christian theology.

3. *The second century.*—This is the period of the beginning of that systematic Christian thinking which later became the church's theology. It was inspired less by the demand of the Christian life for self-expression than by opposition to heretical philosophies. These philosophies were the determining elements in shaping Christian expression. The heresies, by reaction, produced the theology.

The philosophies most influential in molding Christian expression were those of Gnosticism. It is not necessary here, even if it were possible, to analyze the forms of that protean system of thought. It was an honest attempt to join Christian belief to a philosophic world-system. As such it must command respect.

At two points Gnosticism touched the belief in the resurrection, and at both seemed to cut across the essentials of Christian life. In the first place, it denied the reality of the incarnation. For the Gnostic, flesh was evil. He believed that it was impossible for the Divine to unite with flesh. If Spirit seemed to be flesh, that was only a semblance, an illusion. This teaching struck at the root of the ordinary Christian faith. If Christ were not really flesh and blood, then how can he benefit us, who are flesh and blood? The Christian life of the second century sought to keep its feet squarely upon the ground. Its battles with the sins of the flesh were very real. It must have a Savior from those sins who was himself not less real. In the belief of his union of flesh and spirit, the spirit of Christians found religious redemption. Christians felt that they must have a Savior, not apart from the flesh, but in the flesh. If Christ was not in the flesh, then the future is also jeopardized. If Christ was not truly raised, what ground is there for supposing that we shall be raised?

Ignatius speaks with passionate urgency:

Shut your ears, then, when any man speaks to you against Christ Jesus, who was . . . truly born and ate and drank . . . was truly persecuted . . .

was truly crucified and died, who moreover was truly raised from the dead, his Father having raised him, who in like manner will also raise us who believe on him—yea, his Father will raise us in Christ Jesus apart from whom we have no true life. But if, as certain godless ones, unbelievers, say, that he suffered only in appearance, . . . why am I in bonds? Why do I wish to fight with wild beasts? Then I die in vain. Yes, then I am a liar against the Lord [Tral. 9-10].

If these things were done by our Lord in semblance, then I am also a prisoner only in semblance. And why then have I given myself to death, to fire, to sword, to wild beasts? But near the sword, near God; with the beasts, with God [Smyr. 4].

Here is a healthy protest against an empty idealism, which was cutting the ground from beneath the feet of religious experience, and making mere moonshine out of the stern reality of suffering and heroism and martyrdom. The resurrection must be a real resurrection in order to guarantee both the triumph of the Spirit in the flesh now, and the resurrection of the dead in the future.

Thus far the Christian position had been only an emphasis on traditional belief. On another point the dualism of Gnosticism had a direct effect in the development of belief regarding the resurrection. Not only did Gnosticism affirm that the fleshly life of Christ must have been only an appearance, but since all matter is evil, redemption must be from matter, that is, from the flesh. The resurrection of the believer, then, must be not a resurrection of the flesh. But the common Christian belief, inherited from Judaism, was a belief in a resurrection, not apart from, but in, the flesh. Paul, with his capacity for nice distinctions, had worked out an answer to the Greek objections to bodily resurrection by affirming a body which yet is not flesh. Even he could not conceive of the happy life of a bodiless spirit, possibly because he stood too near that common primitive conception of the bodiless shades wandering sadly in Hades. The rest of the Christian world was not able to appreciate even Paul's distinction. He said that flesh and blood should not inherit the kingdom of God. They held that the resurrection would be the resurrection of the flesh. One could illustrate from Clement's letter to the Corinthian Church; from Justin's treatise "On the Resurrection"; from Hermas, Sim. 5:7, 2; from Ignatius, Eph. 7, Smyr. 2; and from numerous other passages in the second-century Christian writings.

During the second century the belief found its formal expression in the old Roman symbol, which is the origin of the Apostles' Creed, in the words "resurrection of the flesh." In the Apostles' Creed the words "resurrection of the flesh" still stand in both Latin and Greek. They were literally translated in the earliest English forms of the Creed, but were later changed to the more Pauline phrase, "resurrection of the body." There were three reasons for thus clinging to the belief in the resurrection of the flesh, even at the expense of the perversion of Paul's ideas. One was that certain schools of Gnostics, notably that of Marcion, claimed that Paul was in agreement with their philosophy. Another was that most Christians could not conceive of eternal life as possible without the flesh. The third was the fear—Hermas and Tertullian speak as though the fear was based on facts—that, if the flesh were not subject to judgment and punishment, sins of the flesh would, for many Christians, be too powerful to be resisted.

The strongest argument for the resurrection of the flesh was the fleshly resurrection of Christ. To quote again from the passionate words of Ignatius:

I know and believe that he was in the flesh even after the resurrection; and when he came to Peter and his company, he said to them, Lay hold and handle me, and see that I am not a demon without body; and they touched him and believed, being joined unto his flesh and blood. Wherefore they also despised death, nay, they triumphed over death [Smyr. 3].

The classic expression of this phase of thought, however, came at the end of the century in Tertullian's *De resurrectione carnis*. Tertullian believed himself to be pleading, not merely for correctness of belief, but for purity of life. He pursues his argument into all possible ramifications. He claims Paul, and does his best to explain away Paul's statement that flesh and blood shall not inherit the kingdom of God; then he turns, as his final triumphant argument, to the resurrection and ascension of Christ.

That, however, which we have reserved for a concluding argument, will now stand as a plea for all, and for the Apostle himself, if he had so abruptly, . . . so indiscriminately, so unconditionally, excluded from the kingdom of God, and indeed from the court of heaven itself, all flesh and blood whatsoever, since Jesus is still sitting there at the right hand of the Father, man, yet God . . . flesh and blood, yet purer than ours.

In various other passages he uses the resurrection of Christ to prove our fleshly resurrection. With this position the important developments of this doctrine in the early church closed.

We have found the following uses of the resurrection of Christ: to prove that he is the Messiah; to prove that believers will also be raised; to prove that the present life of the Christian is a new, spiritual life; to prove that this very flesh which is laid in the grave will rise in the resurrection. Each of these uses carried with it certain emotional values which enriched life and certain ethical values which purified it.

The resurrection, we may well believe, also played some part in the development of a belief in Christ as a person transcending human nature. Just what that part was it is not easy to see. The resurrection seems to have been rather a contributing factor than a primal cause for the growth of belief in a metaphysically divine Christ.

All these beliefs, with the single exception of the anti-Pauline view of the resurrection of the flesh, are still part of the living religion of most Christians. Undoubtedly also for many minds it is the resurrection of Christ which furnishes the proof, or an important part of the proof, of these beliefs. If, however, the connection between any of them and the resurrection of Christ seems to a modern Christian not so clear as it did to a Christian of the second century, that does not necessarily mark his religion as less Christian or his communion with the spirit of Christ as less real. The religious needs of men remain much the same; but the use made of historic beliefs to meet these needs continually changes. We must recognize that the modern emphasis upon the life of Christ, the loving and reverent following of him who "went about doing good," has tended to diminish in some minds the religious values of the resurrection. It is always best to use fully the religious impulse which the time presents. No one should ignore the emphasis on the life of Christ; but it would be well, in the interest of balanced thinking, to ask whether the reverence for the life and teaching of Jesus would have its present power were it not for our sense of his transcendence over life given by the belief in his resurrection.